Aug. 24, 1944

Hi darling,

At work again, but, thank goodness, not too busy. The fewer of our boys who need our attention the better we like it. We are in a lovely spot, on the side of a hill, with a vista of rolling country, the hillsides cut into the irregular pattern of fields, which characterizes the French landscape. A sense of space and of semi-desolation is emparted; the skies are vast, like western skies, with massive and lovely cloud formations. We are very comfortable, and,I believe, quite safe. The F.F.I. guard the hospital at every approach. They are eager and even trigger-happy; I suspect we are in greater danger of being shot by our guards than by Jerry.

I have been meaning to tell you a story for some time, but the tale is still unfolding, and the end is not yet in sight. This boy is about 33; he had indifferent surgical training and was in private practice in a small city in the deep South before the war. He has been in the Army for three years, and, in the due course of time, became a Major. Married, without children, he enjoyed the little homelike things of a rather lazy, slow-moving life. Of quiet nature, somewhat indecisive, pleasant, and easy going, he was converted to anaesthesia by the Army. Besides not being interested in it, this work has seemed below the dignity of his rank. In the course of time, he was sent to Normandy with many others, where he landed D & 1.

In the minds of many, at that time, there was the haunting fear of oneself, the wondering searching inwards to divine how one would react to the bedlam of battle and the exposure to personal injury or death. These were as yet untried men, who had never seen and didn't know - they were too ignorant to be afraid of the fire and steel of the enemy. The awakening was rude and sudden. The first night found them cold and awake under close hitting artillery fire, intermittent strafing and bombing. Next morning there were the wounded - and the dead. The grey, washed-out, wracked expression of men in shock, the twisted shattered limbs, the mutilated faces, breathing through hastily placed tracheotomy tubes, great gaping wounds, with splattered guts, and filth and smell - not singles, nor dozens, but hundreds. This is what war did to men--might do to you. Then work began in earnest; then also began the personal adjustment of those whose job it was to ease the pain, and splint the limb, and close the hole.

For two days, the place was hot, with artillery shells screeching by, exploding violently two hundred yards away, with the rattle of machine gun fire all too close, and with planes falling in flames in the very yard. This was new, and strange, and morbidly fascinating, like watching an auto race from the middle of the speedway. Some were excited, some were excited and scared, some were just scared. Bob was one of these latter, frankly, admittedly scared to death. But there was work to be done, mountains of it. So he got to work, but paused to listen and to wonder. He wore his metal hat in the O.R., he found holes to jump in near the tent and dug his fox-holes deep, and first, before

all else. He became very talkative, and would question the wounded at length about their experiences, filling his mind with the terror of their experiences. He began to eat poorly, and the color left his face, for good. Those early days were tiring. Men needed rest and food. At night the Jerry planes were always over, and the crumph of the bombs, now distant, now close, and the violent chatter and bang of the AA guns turned the nights into a fiery bedlam of sights and noises. To sleep was difficult. It meant doing what you could for protection, mentally assuming the risk, then thinking no more about it. They worked 18 - 20 hours a day, in those times, but I don't think Bob slept very much. And his work deteriorated. Never fast and decisive, he became unbearably slow and irresolute. A five minute task would take half an hour. Instead of seeing what was necessary to be done, then doing it, he would have to be told what and when. And his anaesthesias became inadequate. You cannot do one thing when you are constantly thinking and worrying about something else. At first the chief of his team had generously allowed him to rotate in on the surgery, but this had to be stopped. These were wounded American boys; they needed fast, skillful, energetic treatment. Bob's capacity for this had gradually disappeared. He moved as a man in a trance.

By the end of two weeks, most everyone had settled into their individual adjustment. Of great importance in the outcome, I think, was not only the inherent character of the individual's make-up, but also the extent of his understanding of the issues at stake, the whys and wherefores of his being there at all. The adjustment was easiest for those who felt deepest the purpose and the cause,- their goal was clear, and they stood ready to sacrifice. Their risk seemed inadequate or even selfishly small in the constant presence of the injured and maimed, whose sacrifice was already made, not merely risked. Some adopted a fatalistic attitude - if a shell has your number, there's nothing you can do about it; if not, why worry? This works, and they fared well. Others lost all thought of the danger to themselves in the urgency of their job. They had no time to dwell on potential risks, when the wounded were many and the time short. These men had banished fear; and their consciousness of their purpose and the challenge to their skill brought them through weary hours and tense days. The work for which they had trained so long and in whose value they believed so passionately seemed to fit into a bigger total pattern of purpose and will to win which dwarfed the petty worries of the mere individual. Still others, retained their fear, but though afraid, they recognized the urgency of the need, and rose to it. To these, I think, belongs the greatest creditfor though caught in

the paralyzing bonds of an unanalyzable emotional reaction, they rose above it by the force of their will and the logic of their brain. Scared and uneasy they yet worked like Trojans, and their job was well done. And as time has passed, the haunting emotion has dwindled; and although they fear, they have conquered fear, and are stronger for it. Others, in small numbers, have reacted with a mild elation. Less sure of themselves, they seek exposure to risk that they may constantly prove to themselves a courage which seems to me to be less courage than a fear that they lack courage. Be that as it may, these, too, have fared well.

Then, there were a few, like Bob, whose life became a hell, the plaything of a nameless, haunting fear. He lost pounds of weight, his face became sallow and sunken; he never smiled; his comfort became very important to him, and the quality of the food and the latrines outweighed his work and his opportunity to serve. All things from home absorbed him, and he spent hours writing letters, reading two months' old newspapers. He lost all interest in the people and events around him. Later, when he was moved into a unit in the rear, and others were seeking out their friends in the neighborhood, talking to the people, seeing the sights, having parties, bargaining for eggs or clothes, or swapping yarns, in a word, relaxing and recuperating, he remained aloof and non-communicative. He curled up in his haunted world, and sought escape in his ties with his personal past. All he wanted to do was go home, now, immediately, and forever.

Fear is a disease, a pervading terrible thing. If you should ask Bob what he is afraid of, he couldn't tell you. Fear of injury? of Capture? of death? Probably somewhat, but yet not really, it is a nameless haunting state of mind, which shackles and cripples a man, and changes his entire integrity as an individual. He is as beaten as if by one of Hitler's rubber hoses.

Men in the center of combat, in the noise & shock & terror of the hell that is war, lose their mental adjustment and become neuro-psychiatric casualties - "shell-shock" or "combat exhaustion" it is called. Often the situation exceeds human endurance. This is not simple fear, which insidiously, over a period of time, has ruined Bob, not only for now but I think for always. For how can a man regain his integrity who has so completely lost himself? And how many years of southern indolence and safety will it take to erase the haunted look and quiet that internal gnawing sense of inadequacy which is his private hell?

I tell you this story because I know you, like myself, are always interested in the reactions of those about you. I think the battlefield is the most interesting laboratory of all, for there the crucible burns the most violently to test the calibre and soul of men. And thence emerges greatness and defeat in every individual.

I have said little of myself, as how can I judge? But I have been lucky, for I have had you, and in you the everpresent and beloved principle for which we fight. You, my darling, are my strength and my protection. In you, I trust.

Always,

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